

Meet an MI Student

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As a senior at Oberlin College, I felt ambivalent about my post-graduate plans. I'd decided to pursue a career in academia, focusing on teaching and research in ecology. At the same time, I wasn't ready to plunge into a Ph.D. program right away. Instead, I wanted to live abroad, apply my undergraduate education to solving practical problems and, most importantly, contribute to those who had not benefitted from the same privileges I have enjoyed.

I had dreamed of doing Peace Corps service since I was a teenager, but didn't want to put my formal education on hold. Through online research, I came across the University of Washington (UW) School of Environmental and Forest Sciences Peace Corps Master's International (PCMI) program in international forestry. This program offered me everything I wanted: A chance to live abroad, to get real-world experience, and to give of myself. At the same time, I wouldn't have to leave my current professional track and could continue growing intellectually. It seemed the UW PCMI program suited me perfectly and, five years later, I can say that my expectations were realized.



My academic studies and Peace Corps service fit together quite well. As a Volunteer, I lived in a small (120-household) village in rural Eastern Paraguay. About half of my work consisted of extension projects with small farmers: planting small tree nurseries, encouraging the development of farmers' committees, and facilitating better soil management through agroforestry and green manure use. My remaining projects took place in the schools. I taught topics such as environmental science, English, and reproductive health in kindergarten through 12th grade and trained teachers as environmental educators. The horticulture and development classes I took at UW were especially helpful in facilitating my work. Many farmers in my community were just starting to establish plantations and agroforestry systems, so it was important to have a background in plant production and sustainable system design. At the same time, my Peace Corps work grounded my UW forestry education.



While in Paraguay, I took advantage of my fluency in Guarani, the widely-spoken indigenous language, to interview 45 farmers about their cultivation of small-scale eucalyptus plantations. After my return to the States, I analyzed these interview data and produced a capstone report on the silvicultural, economic, and environmental context of eucalyptus plantation forestry among small farmers in Eastern Paraguay. Peace Corps and MI experiences vary among individuals but, for me, the PCMI route was excellent. I can't believe how much I've grown as a person and an ecologist.